



The Correctional Oasis

October 2016, Volume 13, Issue 9

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Many Thanks

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Corrections Staff Well-being Programs: To Implement or Not?
2012 © Gregory Morton, Mike Denhof, and Caterina Spinaris, PhD

As the conversation increases across the country and internationally about the importance of corrections staff wellness, we are reprinting this article from the January 2012 issue of the Correctional Oasis.

In our role as correctional employees we are problem solvers. We don't like letting problems fester. We are trained to confront difficult situations. We are eager, sometimes even overly so, to address issues when we see them. We don't like unfinished business or letting obvious oversights go uncorrected.

However, there is one historical predicament that impacts all of us but that none of us have ever addressed fully – the mental and emotional toll that the profession itself takes on its practitioners. Instead we have simply lived with it, even though recognition of negative effects of the job is not a new thing, as illustrated in this quote from 1980 regarding rookie corrections officers:

Watching their initial entrance into the prison can be quite an experience. The hope on their faces, the positive anxiety of their motivated gait—at first, it's all there. Then, slowly and almost methodically, the smiles wane, the expectations atrophy, and the desires to perform in a positive fashion succumb to escapist fantasy and verbally acknowledged skepticism. After six months to a year the period of hope and enthusiasm should almost be all over¹.

At Desert Waters Correctional Outreach, we call the cumulative effect of stressors inherent to correctional settings Corrections Fatigue. These stressors may be organizational, operational and/or traumatic. Organizational stress stems from leadership and management practices and from the manner

in which corrections employees interact and “do business” with one another. Operational stress derives from the peculiarities of the job, such as shift work and mandatory overtime. Traumatic stress results from witnessing violence, injury and death on the job, or being the victim of assault or threats of violence. We maintain that these adverse influences have not been addressed as thoroughly as is needed. There are emerging national data about the elevated levels of corrections staff’s organizational, operational and traumatic stress and the associated toxic effects.

The data match the anecdotal conclusions of most corrections veterans about the intrinsic difficulties of the corrections environment.

There are reasons for this historical lack of extensive and systematic study of the effects of corrections work on its practitioners. This paper will discuss some of those reasons. Our hope is that by openly naming some of them, a more comprehensive and balanced discussion of this topic will be catalyzed among corrections professionals of all ranks and in a variety of correctional settings. Alternatively, the reader may prefer to prepare internally a briefer version of this document so as to address more specific issues of his/her agency, perhaps using this one as a template. We strongly encourage either approach. May the dialogue begin, or in some cases expand!

Many agencies have conducted wellness programs for staff. Nearly all have Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) available, maybe for family members too. It is our hope at Desert Waters that these activities are only the beginning of solutions that corrections staff and their loved ones can hope to receive. We recognize that change can come slowly, many times for good reason. But the difference between a well-considered solution and the fad of the day is the amount of time, energy and focus that goes into choosing the proper course of action. It is in that spirit that this paper is presented.

Typically, wellness and EAP programs do not adequately address the ways Corrections Fatigue impacts the individual staff member or the organizational climate or culture of corrections institutions. Wellness and EAP programs are not typically set up to provide means to improve the workplace atmosphere. If the organizational climate and culture remain negative, a vicious cycle ensues where jaded veteran professionals can stifle new employees by passing on dysfunctional attitudes and perspectives, thus perpetuating the negative influences of Corrections Fatigue. This is of course not true for all veteran corrections professionals, but it certainly occurs.

Effective organizational improvement programs require interventions which target the reduction of organizational, operational and traumatic stressors, and foster knowledge and techniques for managing emotions and health when unavoidable stressors occur. All three categories of stressors need to be systematically addressed for effective and lasting improvements in employee well-being and functioning, and for the maintenance of healthy correctional work environments.

Corrections Fatigue is the cumulative negative transformation of one’s self or personality that develops over time as a result of repeated exposure to corrections workplace stressors, and to a degree that hinges on the relative success of both personal and collective strategies for coping. Said in another way, Corrections Fatigue involves not just repeated discrete experiences of stress, but also a gradual and cumulative wear-and-tear of the body, soul and spirit, for both individuals and groups.

To quote an active corrections professional, “What I come across at work wounds my soul.”

The toll of Corrections Fatigue can be understood to manifest on a continuum of health status, spanning from the presence of few or minimal signs, to signs of moderate severity, to the meeting of PTSD criteria, and even to the extreme of becoming homicidal and/or suicidal.

In the following pages a variety of assertions for and against implementation of systemic interventions designed to promote the health and health maintenance of corrections worker communities are discussed.

The discussion is informed in particular by recent findings on the health impact of repeated exposure to traumatic events in the corrections workplace, and other material, such as individual and collective opinions from experienced workers in the field. The discussion is intended to help deconstruct uninformed claims and elaborate more informed propositions and solutions.

PERSPECTIVES AGAINST THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMS THAT ADDRESS ORGANIZATIONAL, OPERATIONAL AND TRAUMATIC STRESS OF CORRECTIONS EMPLOYEES, AND THEIR REFUTATION

1. WE DON'T HAVE THE FUNDS FOR ADDITIONAL EMPLOYEE HEALTH INTERVENTION/MAINTENANCE PROGRAMS:

Corrections agencies are already huge consumers of economic resources. Adding new programs—trainings, system-wide interventions, counseling and support, family education, continued research—will require new resources and will therefore cause agencies to incur additional costs. Since it is cheaper to operate with the services we currently have, it would be fiscally prudent to wait for economically healthier times before undertaking anything further.

While it is fact that budgets are often strained for correctional organizations, it is also true that the absence of effective health maintenance programming for corrections workers leads to increased costs that would not otherwise be incurred. Unhealthy and/or unhappy employees, for example: are more likely to quit their jobs, use more sick days, require more doctor visits, use substances in excess, and create the necessity of costly overtime payment to employees who must take up the slack. Unhealthy and unhappy employees are the building blocks of unhealthy and sickened work environments—environments lacking supportiveness of coworkers, tolerance for differing perspectives, acknowledgement of emotionally and mentally taxing circumstances, or sensitivity to human suffering and health maintenance needs. For all of the above reasons, investment in intervention and health-maintenance programs offers not only financial rewards but also improved quality of life, job performance and safety in the work place.

2. CORRECTIONS IS INHERENTLY DIFFICULT AND THEREFORE SIMPLY REQUIRES TOUGH PERSONNEL:

The most violent and/or antisocial members of our population are collected according to the tenets of jurisprudence and then assembled all in one location. Daily and voluntarily corrections employees walk into their workplaces to keep order and ensure safety. Potentially traumatic incidents can occur and are expected to occur. This is not new. Employees knew of these conditions when they started. The physical environment and potential dangers are commonly recognized. “I had no idea” is really not much of a defense. Moreover, why would we want to keep staff that can't stand up to the pressures? The environment itself plays a large part in the sorting process for who stays and who goes. This is probably no different from the influence on any employee in any working environment—a day-care center worker, a landscape contractor, a treatment plant technician, a roofer, and so on. If you don't like it, you change jobs.

While this is a fair statement to say that corrections work requires toughness, it is also true that “toughness” is an adaptation that comes with a variety of consequences, both for the individual and the work community. We become callous and emotionally shielded to protect ourselves from emotional pain and discomfort and from repeated experiences of a potentially traumatic nature. While this coping mechanism can be adaptive in the short term for individuals, as a long-term approach to dealing with the unique stresses of correctional environments, emotional numbing is much less functional, and in

fact it is one of the characteristics of Corrections Fatigue.

When we mask our feelings to an excessive degree, we gain some emotional protection, but we pay a large price for it. Emotional callousness and emotional numbing can easily carry over into our personal lives, leaving our family members feeling disconnected from us, and us from them. Emotional callousness also promotes insensitivity and indifference, which rob a person not only of negative experiences but also of positive ones. On a systemic level, insensitive/emotionally callous employees take a toll on newer employees by stifling their optimism, discouraging a natural and full range of human experience and emotion, and reducing new employees' capacity for empathy and sensitivity.

Moreover, emotional callousness and numbing are likely to encourage insensitive and even hostile or combative attitudes toward offenders, with all the consequent dangers that these attitudes engender. Propagation of an ideology of toughness in correctional environments is not an optimal approach to health maintenance for correctional cultures. It has some short-term utility as a means to coping with difficult emotions, but its long-term and systemic consequences to employee health and well-being are likely to far outweigh its benefits.

3. INCREASED OPENNESS AND EDUCATION ABOUT THE NATURE OF HEALTH RISKS INHERENT TO CORRECTIONS WORK WILL PROVIDE LAZY WORKERS WITH AN EXCUSE TO JUSTIFY POOR WORK PERFORMANCE, ABSENTEEISM, OR MALINGERING:

It's not the employees who quit and leave who cause the greatest problem; it's the employees who quit and stay. Marginal cases, whose motivations are confusing and whose health outcomes can be debated, are a huge drain on the costs of an agency and the morale of shifts and work units. Giving them reason to blame the system and demand healthcare due to a work-related condition will only make the financial drain bigger.

Realistically speaking, there will always be an occasional low-performance employee or even a malingerer from time to time within the ranks of an organization. However, it is illogical to assume that full disclosure of the health risks and consequences associated with corrections work will result in a landslide of lazy or malingering employees. Human beings naturally want to live healthy and full lives, if they can. In the face of difficulties or stressful circumstances, human beings naturally adopt coping mechanisms that are to some degree functional for them. But they do not always choose good methods of coping, often because they are not aware of all the options. People who abuse or take advantage of systems may do so at least partly because they are unable to adapt and succeed through more functional channels of coping and problem-solving. In fact, the best way to deter employees from adopting such negative ways of coping, such as malingering, is by educating and training staff on optimal strategies and techniques for health maintenance, and by systemically cultivating a work community that is healthy, supportive, and committed to pro-health activities.

Effective and functional strategies for health maintenance, stress management, and the creation of a positive organizational climate are available. Administrators must be willing to blaze new trails and work against the grain of potentially entrenched and systemically dysfunctional practices and thinking. They must also do so without iron clad guarantees of success. There are no such guarantees. Success usually emerges gradually through learning from repeated attempts and persistent efforts to solve a problem. Inaction, on the other hand, is a fairly certain path to continually high turnover rates, high sick leave rates, employee under-functioning, stress-related mistakes, oversights and accidents, and—only too often— employee suicides. Both history and empirical research support this view.

4. IT IS THE INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEE'S RESPONSIBILITY TO TAKE CARE OF THEIR OWN HEALTH AND WELLBEING, NOT THE ORGANIZATION'S:

Work is only part of an employee's day. No agency, no matter how large or small, can be expected to address all of the modern life pressures that each member of their workforce faces. Employees must be expected to take care of their personal lives on their own. We expect offenders to do so to a large degree. Having different expectations for employees would be bad corrections practice and also unmanageable.

While it is true that individuals, and individual employees, are responsible to take action both at work and outside of work to promote and maintain their health and well-being, the idea that individuals can do so while spending the majority of their waking hours in a systemically toxic work environment is untenable. Human beings are social creatures and the world is to a great extent socially constructed. Even the most radical or independent of individuals will experience a powerful amount of stress in the absence of support that stems from social validation—validation of their needs, beliefs, values and behaviors.

It is simply too much to expect individuals to immerse themselves in a high-pressure community, such as a correctional work environment, and be able to maintain health and well-being if the people around them (offenders or coworkers) behave in unhealthy or antisocial ways, or embrace destructive or antisocial values. Such communities result in diseased systems—environments that promote contagious and pervasive dysfunctions and disorders. Self-help and individual coping strategies for health maintenance can only do so much and for so long for workers immersed in such systems. It is for this reason that employee health must be addressed on an organizational level in addition to an individual level.

It is without a doubt within the organization's best interest to do everything they can to ensure that their employees and work environments are healthy and configured in such a way as to promote health maintenance. Work performance is inextricably intertwined with employee health. Thus the administrator who has an interest in optimal and safe performance of his/her employees cannot ignore addressing health maintenance and well-being as a prerequisite. This is true in general for all types of work communities but arguably especially true for correctional work environments, given the inherent dangerousness and negativity of the environment, and given the inherent traumatizing potential for corrections professionals.

5. THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PROGRAMS ADDRESSING ORGANIZATIONAL, OPERATIONAL, AND TRAUMATIC STRESS HAS NOT BEEN PROVEN:

An extensively researched approach is necessary before serious action is taken. While it is good news that studies could lead to evidence-based programs for correctional employees' well-being, for now that effort is in the hands of experts and specialists. Corrections-specific causes may be felt or presumed by those of us who do the daily work and see the consequences first hand, but the rigorous scientific conclusions are only beginning to be published. Therefore, we should wait until there is more evidence that the corrections workplace impacts employees sufficiently negatively to warrant interventions on their behalf.

While a mix of evidence for or against the impact of programs for correctional employees' well-being can be identified in the research literature, we need to remember that even our best science and research methods can only capture so much, and this is even more true in areas of interest as dynamic, complicated and elusive as are social systems and psychological processes.

If we limit our willingness to take action or make changes because the "correct" decision is not crystal clear or 100% certain, then we may be waiting indefinitely. Decision-makers in correctional organizations, for the health of their employees and work communities, we would argue, are best

served by not only taking into account what available research literature is saying, but also what their personal experience and judgment are saying, what the consensus judgment of their peers and employees are saying, what the history of events in the organization suggests, and any other sources of evidence about what is really happening, such as feedback from employees' families. The consequences of a default to the status quo are just too costly in correctional environments. We cannot continue to do the same things and expect different results. Suicide rates, for example, are highly elevated for correctional staff² and they will continue to be unless new and systemic changes are made in correctional environments—changes designed to promote and maintain employee health and well-being.

MORE REASONS FOR THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PROGRAMS THAT ADDRESS ORGANIZATIONAL, OPERATIONAL AND TRAUMATIC STRESS OF CORRECTIONS EMPLOYEES

1. INCREASED STAFF MENTAL HEALTH AND OVERALL WELL-BEING:

This is a given within the construct of Corrections Fatigue. The existence of EAPs is based on the recognition that employees' mental health is an important component of organizational success, regardless of the line of work. Research identifies a positive return on investment (ROI) for EAPs, and as a result, EAPs continue to flourish. While employee mental health is difficult to quantify, valid measures can be operationalized through research and evidence of progress collected. Desert Waters' 2011 study³ of PTSD prevalence and its impact on health and functioning has estimated PTSD rates to be highly elevated (27%) for corrections employees, for example. The ability of typical EAPs to adequately address the unique health needs of corrections workers on a systemic level is rather low. Off-the-shelf EAPs are not structured to provide that kind of service. Substantive and work-related mental health support requires expert-guided systems-level intervention, ongoing occupational health maintenance practices, and promotion and adoption of preventive health measures.

2. REDUCED STAFF SUICIDES:

Suicide rates are highly elevated for corrections professionals relative to the general population². There is no debating this. It is a well-established fact. Staff suicides are not only directly devastating for spouses, children and loved ones, but also to the mindset of corrections employee cultures. Suicides send powerful, reverberating signals, both inside and outside organizations, about the risks and potential toll of careers in the field of corrections—signals that influence the decisions of potential future employees who are considering career paths. To the extent that good prospects opt away from corrections due to a marred reputation, the profession and the quality of operations will be downgraded.

Staff suicides represent the reddest of red flags indicating serious systemic problems. While all employee suicides cannot be directly attributed to the toll of stressors and trauma inherent to corrections work, the well-established elevated rates particular to this field of work strongly indicate that suicide in fact is a hazard of the occupation. The gradual wear-and-tear suffered due to Corrections Fatigue may well render employees emotionally fragile, and thus more vulnerable and likely to succumb when faced with "last straw" losses that they would have otherwise been able to prevent or endure. Research indicates that individuals who take their own lives most often are lacking social and emotional support, and are feeling hopeless about the future, powerless to change their circumstances, and/or worthless. These characteristics can be addressed both individually and systemically through training on healthy principles of coping with adversity, positive employee interaction and support, and proper handling of employees following exposure to particularly traumatizing or otherwise stressful events.

3. REDUCED OPERATING COSTS: Agency-specific research similar to the national studies conducted by Desert Waters can help agencies identify sources, sometimes veiled, that drive up agency expenses. You

may have already explored or become familiar with some of these sources yourself. You might even be able to fit actual numbers into the discussion. For our purposes here, we cite Desert Waters' national-level data submitted by all levels and disciplines of correctional employees.

a) **REDUCED OVERTIME FROM UNSCHEDULED CALL-INS:** Desert Waters' most recent nationwide study³ on correctional employee wellness found that staff who met PTSD criteria (27% PTSD Positive) had almost twice the number of sick leave days per year and three times the number of worker compensation days than those who did not meet PTSD criteria. The reality of security staff scheduling is that if the assigned employee is absent, then a substitute must be found. In most cases this means that a fellow employee must work overtime. The cost for that post is a pay rate increased by 50%. Reports have been published of security staff making higher salaries than management level staff due to nothing more than frequent overtime hours. The necessity of overtime work also aggravates the health of employees, particularly if it happens more than occasionally. And so the Corrections Fatigue cycle continues while the cash register rings.

b) **REDUCED MEDICAL COSTS:** Desert Waters' 2011 study also showed that PTSD-positive employees reported almost twice the number of doctor visits and had twice as many stress-related chronic health conditions, with sleep disturbances, depression, obesity and digestive problems representing the top four chronic ailments. PTSD-positive staff reported significantly more use of alcoholic beverages per week, and tobacco per day, than the PTSD-negative group did. The potential impact of all of the above findings upon health care-related costs, not to mention quality of work performance and morale, are fairly self-evident.

c) **REDUCED TURNOVER:** Correctional employees stay in their jobs not only for income and retirement interests, but also to contribute to an important and worthwhile societal function, and to generate a sense of meaning and connectedness in relation to their work communities and the wider communities in which they live. Turn-over costs in the field of corrections are enormous relative to other industries and very likely due to the particularly difficult environments in which corrections professionals must operate during the majority of their full-time working lives. While corrections work will always be a particularly tough environment to serve in due to its unique risks and its challenges to employee health and well-being, the necessary training and interventions are available to equip and prepare workers for the task. Reducing the high cost of turnover, and keeping it reduced, requires systemic level intervention and long term commitment to implementing both research-guided and professionally recommended strategies. Successful interventions to improve the health of employees and systems can be expected to, over time, reduce both recruitment costs and training expenses. The better trained the workers are, and the more in-sync they are with one another, the more frequently will health and effective work skills naturally transfer from one employee to the next, through on-the-job modeling.

4. OPTIMIZED WORK PERFORMANCE, HEALTHIER INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND MEANINGFUL, VALUE-GUIDED DECISION-MAKING:

A sense of meaning is essential for human beings and cultures at all levels, including work cultures. Through Desert Waters' informal questioning of staff over the years, we have repeatedly encountered statements characterizing coworkers of all ranks as a top source of work-related stress—often even exceeding the perceived amount of stress following from interactions with offenders. We hear complaints about other employees' complacency, bullying, rudeness, favoritism, unfairness, meanness, or laziness—to name a few. This feedback further reinforces the view that the cumulative stressors that figure into Corrections Fatigue are constituted to an extent by changeable facets of organizational practices and patterns of behavior among staff.

The benefits of work communities structured to address those issues are many: in terms of individual employee health, well-being, and safety; in terms of optimal and well-coordinated functioning of work communities; in terms of organizational reputations; and in terms of leadership figures who are respected and who inspire their employees in productive and functional ways.

5. INCREASED INTERPERSONAL SKILLS FOR EFFECTIVE OFFENDER MANAGEMENT:

The most effective corrections employees are those with the knowledge and skill to consistently model pro-social behaviors while expecting the same from the offenders they supervise. The basic concepts of role modeling, reinforcement and re-direction are much more successfully accomplished when employees can attend to their work with minimal emotional disruptions. Many offenders are highly skilled at keeping employees off balance, and thus employees are easily susceptible to impulsive knee-jerk reactions of fight or flight. Employees with adequate training in managing the organizational, operational and traumatic stressors inherent to their work lives, however, are both less susceptible to being manipulated and better equipped to manage offenders in a manner that reduces emotional and behavioral volatility and acting out, while also promoting environmental order and control.

6. INCREASED WORK SATISFACTION:

Numerous job satisfaction studies have underlined the fact that more than money, more than work environment, more than seemingly fundamental conditions such as safety and health, people are inherently satisfied at work when they have a job they can make decisions about, when they have opportunity to successfully complete a defined set of duties, and when they are recognized for their efforts and accomplishments. Satisfied employees go beyond the minimum requirements of their job. They pay more attention to detail, try harder, and are overall less vulnerable to Corrections Fatigue. They also take fewer shortcuts, and are less likely to call in sick or violate policies. While incentives like salary increases are more intuitive potential motivators, increasing an employee's tool box of skills is arguably among the shortest routes to promoting employee work satisfaction. Corrections is a "people business." Thorough training in interpersonal and leadership skills for managing offenders and interacting with coworkers and subordinates is absolutely essential.

7. IMPROVED ABILITY TO FUNCTION AND ENJOY LIFE OUTSIDE OF WORK:

One of the most dramatic results observed in Desert Waters' 2011 study of corrections worker health and well-being had to do with off-duty functioning. PTSD-positive employees demonstrated significantly higher depression, anxiety and stress scores, and significantly lower life satisfaction scores. In addition, they demonstrated significantly less ability to: maintain personal relationships, enjoy leisure time, effectively care for dependents, and carry out personal responsibilities. We have to wonder, what exactly did our loved ones do to deserve this from us as partners? Do our partners not deserve to be in relationships that are mutually beneficial and mutually supportive? Adequate partnership requires health maintenance and ability to function and ability to support the needs of others from time to time. Our partners stick by us in difficult times and are often nevertheless "rewarded" by having us leave our best selves at work. Without well informed and well devised systemic level interventions to promote and maintain employee health, the impact of Corrections Fatigue will continue to spill over into the personal lives of corrections professionals—as if their work lives were not difficult enough. Balanced and healthy human beings need to be able to rest and enjoy their time away from work. This is true for everybody, regardless of their profession, but even more so for individuals who choose careers in an occupation as uniquely stressful and challenging as corrections.

Strained or failed relationships with significant others compound stress, promote loss and isolation, and render corrections workers even more vulnerable to depression, substance abuse or suicide.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE RESEARCH:

We have referred to evidence-based studies earlier in this paper. As the science and technology of offender rehabilitation improves, it becomes increasingly possible and likely that jurisdictions will create mandates for the reduction of recidivism, as is now the case in several states.

Taking into account changes following from healthcare reform, it is also becoming clear that funding sources for healthcare providers of all types will increasingly hinge on the ability of the organization to objectively and tangibly demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness. And there is no reason to expect that programs designed for the maintenance of corrections employee health will somehow remain immune to the same criteria.

A recent study of PTSD prevention showed that 12 weekly sessions of either of two types of psychological trauma treatment (cognitive therapy and prolonged exposure therapy) reduced the incidence of PTSD dramatically 5 and 9 months later, as compared to no treatment or medication treatment alone⁴. Desert Waters' 2011 study of PTSD prevalence and its impact on health and functioning provide compelling indication of the need for such preventive interventions, based on the discovery of elevated PTSD rates, significantly higher rates of PTSD than other trauma-exposed professionals, significantly more co-occurring disorders, significantly higher levels of functional impairments, and significantly lower life satisfaction, for individuals meeting PTSD criteria.

IN SUM

All that is required at this point is to start the conversation. Desert Waters believes that once the discussion begins, the seriousness of the issues will become more apparent, and the need for changes more pressing and prioritized. We want your organization to be in the best position possible to protect the health of its employees and their families, to maintain the most orderly, healthy, and effective work cultures possible, and to establish and/or maintain your organizations as among the most reputable and successful. We fully recognize and honor the important functions your organizations serve for society and the risks your workforce takes in the universal struggle to contend with inherently challenging work conditions and critically important responsibilities.

If it was not clear to you already, it is probably clear now that we at Desert Waters have strong opinions about corrections employees' well-being, their workplace climate, and the causes and consequences of Corrections Fatigue. We do not, however, ask you to adopt our opinions for your agency without serious and intentional consideration. You are the experts on your agency. All we ask is that you do undertake that deliberation, and that you do have those conversations and join in the dialogue. We intend to be here, designing systems-wide interventions, delivering trainings, certifying instructors, conducting research, staffing the Corrections Ventline, and counseling corrections employees and their family members just as we have been for the past nine years.* Please contact us at any time. We all want the same things, namely the physical, psychological and spiritual health for you and the men and women of your agency's workforce. We hope this discussion takes us all closer to that destination.

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**Editor's note: After several years of offering the Corrections Ventline crisis line and counseling to corrections professionals and their families, we now concentrate on developing and offering trainings and other systemic interventions, and staff assessment. CS*

Surviving Corrections Work—Learning from Best Practice By Dominic Kelly

The Northern Ireland Prison Service (NIPS) is a small jurisdiction with approximately 1500 inmates housed across three correctional facilities. Yet, it has been subject to many complex challenges and much controversy over the years. Northern Ireland suffered through decades of political conflict from the 1960s to the early 2000s, a period colloquially referred to as “The Troubles.” Around 3,500 people were killed with over 50,000 casualties amongst 37,000 shooting incidents and 16,200 bombing incidents.

The correctional facilities played a central role in the conflict as they housed those interned or charged with paramilitary-related offences (peak population was around 3,000, double today's population.) During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, prison was a place of violence, of protest, of rioting, and of inmate and staff deaths. There still exists a legacy from the political conflict of the past, namely attacks on law enforcement personnel. Two correctional officers have been murdered by dissident republican paramilitary groups in 2012 and in April 2016 in the midst of ongoing security threats against all law enforcement staff. NIPS also experiences the modern-day challenges of corrections experienced across the UK and beyond: institutional overcrowding; prison violence (prisoner-on-prisoner and prisoner-on-staff); high levels of drug abuse and mental health issues amongst inmates; self-harm, suicides and deaths in custody; balancing custody and care; being expected to “do more with less” in light of public sector budget cuts; countering a negative reputation; and high level of public scrutiny and scapegoating. Unsurprisingly, NIPS experiences high levels of work-related absences, of early medical retirements, of corrections staff turnover, of poor morale and repeated leadership changes.

In 2014, I began to reframe my views on corrections work toward a trauma-informed perspective. Many of my colleagues were increasingly being exposed to traumatic incidents, and many were suffering stress-related absences, low mood and morale and relationship problems outside work, not to mention the grief suffered from the murder of David Black two years prior. I was interested in the existence of support mechanisms for corrections staff. I noticed that whilst there were examples of Employee Assistance Programs (EAP) following a staff member “going sick” (a counselling service, Carecall) and some procedures for allowing for a more gradual submersion back into corrections work following work-related absences (limited fitness postings), there was little in the way of ongoing support and supervision of staff wellness. There also existed little research or discourse in the UK about corrections staff psychological health, or its relation to organisational performance or inmate outcomes.

In contrast, I noticed pockets of excellence in the United States where correctional staff wellness policies were built into correctional departments' corporate structures, where research was ongoing and had been published, where training programs and assessment tools had been designed, and where there was contemporary dialogue on the importance of this issue. This was certainly true of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach (DWCO).

DWCO's mission, "to promote the occupational, personal and family well-being of the public safety workforce through the provision of support, resources and customized data-driven solutions," imbued me with excitement and encouragement – nothing like this organisation exists anywhere in the UK.

I was also drawn to their research on "Corrections Fatigue" via webinars facilitated through the National Institute of Corrections in 2014. The concept made so much sense and it felt validating, as I am sure it does to many corrections staff who have viewed their work. There was an acknowledgement of the unique stressors in corrections which, if untreated, could lead to detrimental consequences for corrections staff, their families, their colleagues and the inmates. I was excited to discover that Dr. Spinaris and her team had compiled much research around the topic, they had developed assessment tools for measuring correctional staff health, they offered trainings, workshops and interventions as well as learning materials. In many ways, DWCO is a "one-stop-shop" for correctional staff well-being.

I made contact with Dr. Spinaris in 2014 and we discussed the unique context around corrections in Northern Ireland. There was an immediate connection in a shared passion for this topic and we discussed the prospect of utilising DWCO's assessment instruments to measure the health of corrections staff in Northern Ireland. Unfortunately, the idea was met with hesitation by correctional administrators, but I was not going to give up at the first obstacle. I was alerted by a colleague to the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust(see www.wcmt.org.uk). The objective of this charity, which was set up following the death of Winston Churchill in 1965, is to allow individuals from the UK to travel overseas to explore and identify areas of best practice relating to their occupation and to bring back ideas to improve organisational practices. I felt that this was the best opportunity to develop corrections staff wellness initiatives in Northern Ireland. I decided to apply and I entitled my project, "Surviving Prison Work: Prison Staff Wellness Strategies" with an aim to explore five areas: (1) research (what do we know about the effect of corrections work on staff?); (2) support tools (what training/workshops/learning tools exist?); (3) wellness policy (what structures exist within the public/private/charity sectors that focus on this?); (4) promotion (how do individuals/groups communicate and draw awareness to this issue?); (5) evaluation (does investment in prison staff wellness have a positive impact on staff, inmates and the organisation?).

I was awarded a fellowship in February this year, and I began my journey as a 2016 Winston Churchill Fellow across the United States in September. After a week in Washington D.C. (where I had fruitful discussions with many extremely helpful corrections professionals and was introduced to key individuals), I travelled to Colorado to spend a fortnight with Dr. Spinaris and her team at DWCO. I had been approved to attend their 4-day *Corrections Fatigue to Fulfilment Training for Trainers* course. To me, this sits at the core of the aims of this project – bringing back accredited skills and learning to my own country. A group of seventeen participants from corrections, police, probation and chaplaincy from across the United States, South Africa and Northern Ireland attended the course. The training material was insightful, accessible and truly interactive – I was able to visualise (and practice) presenting this material to our own staff throughout the week and making some giant leaps forward. It was enjoyable to spend a week with committed staff who wanted to make a difference in their own organisations. We were able to share stories about the challenges of our work. It also identified to me that we need to strengthen ties with other international counterparts in order to learn from each other and recognise that correctional staff struggles are not unique but shared.

I spent the second week in Florence with DWCO exploring all aspects of the organisation including its sources of funding; how they promote correctional staff wellness; their research, products and services (research articles, conference/workshops, social media); corrections specific-assessment instruments; multimedia training tools (webinars on corrections fatigue and corrections fulfilment, *Critical Incident*

First Aid e-learning module, videos), the *Correctional Oasis*, books, and inspirational posters. I was also graciously given a continuous audience with the DWCO team to discuss all topics relating to correctional staff wellness and gather expert opinions on the most effective ways in which to develop wellness initiatives in Northern Ireland.

In sum, my previous assertions that DWCO is a pioneer in understanding and assisting in correctional staff wellness were exceeded. In truth, we all have a lot of catching up to do. Their example of perseverance in breaking new ground in this field is a high benchmark, but one that is certainly worth striving for.

My journey continues on to Arizona, Nebraska, Oregon, Massachusetts and Vermont to meet with and learn from individuals and groups who are invested in understanding and improving law enforcement staff wellness. You can follow my journey on <http://domkellycorrections.wordpress.com>. I leave Colorado with a greater sense of optimism that I am on the right track and a determination to utilise what I have learned to develop a staff wellness-orientated perspective in corrections in Northern Ireland. I leave behind new friends, but this only begins our collaboration as there is so much we can share.

In conclusion, I urge us all, whether we are corrections staff, supervisors, family members, academics or concerned onlookers, to remain steadfast in discussing and documenting the difficulties of working in corrections; to see in ourselves and our colleagues when traumatic, operational and organisational stressors are taking too much of a hold on our personality, our outlook, our physical and emotional health and our behaviour; and to remain committed to collectively strive for corrections fulfilment through positive strategies we have developed ourselves and we have learned from ground-breaking work like that of Desert Waters Correctional Outreach.

Editor's Note: Dominic, thank you for your very kind words. Over the years we have been graced with many talented individuals who have helped us in our mission, for which we are humbly thankful. May your passion for the well-being of corrections professionals continue to grow and to spread. CS

Organizational Assessments Offered by DWCO

The Corrections Fatigue Status Assessment™, by Michael D. Denhof, PhD & Caterina G. Spinaris, PhD, which measures the degree of presence or absence of Corrections Fatigue along 9 dimensions/scales. For more information, go to http://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CFSA-V5_Data_Sheet_07-14-16.pdf.

The Corrections Staff Resilience Inventory™, by Michael D. Denhof, PhD & Caterina G. Spinaris, PhD, which measures the presence of resilience-promoting behaviors along 4 dimensions/scales. For more information, go to http://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/CSRI_Data_Sheet_07-14-16.pdf.

The Depression Danger Scale™, by Michael D. Denhof, PhD, which measures severe depression and suicide risk. For more information, go to http://desertwaters.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/DDS_Data_Sheet_07-14-16.pdf.

Miscellaneous

Desert Waters now offers a 5-day Peer Supporter Training course for Corrections Professionals. Email us at http://desertwaters.com/?page_id=744 for details.

The holiday season can be emotionally taxing and otherwise stressful, whether staff are working or whether they have the time off. Desert Waters will be offering a Holiday Staff Support Webpage that presents coping strategies and other resources for staff and their families. The webpage will be available from mid-November, 2016 to mid-February, 2017. If your agency would like more information as to how to obtain this service for employees, please contact us by emailing us at http://desertwaters.com/?page_id=744 or calling 719-784-4727. Subscribing agencies will be provided with a link and password to the page, so they can disseminate that information to their employees.

Use DWCO's unique Amazon link when shopping online: <http://smile.amazon.com/ch/30-0151345>. When you do, Amazon will donate to DWCO a percentage of your purchase amount. Your donations make a difference!

MANY THANKS

Thank you for supporting the mission of Desert Waters!

Individual donors: Anonymous donors, Karen Boyd, TC & Joellen Brown, Diane Tramutola-Lawson, Jeff & Connie Mueller, Kevin & Robin Rivard, Harold & Carol Severson

Business donors: Aaron's; Paul & Karen Austin, Austin Automotive; Janice Graham & Company, P.C.; Tim Mullican, Canon Steam Way

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Special thanks also go to: T.C. Brown, Wes Connett, Nancy Cowie, Erinn Criner, Susan Jones, Andrew May, Gregory Morton, Jeff Mueller, Melissa Ortiz, Brent Parker, Beau Riche, Patti Schniedwind, Daniel Sedillo, Dave Stephens, Dawn Renee Smith, Eleni Spinari

In Memoriam

CO and decorated veteran Kenneth Bettis

EOW: September 16, 2016

Succumbed to injuries inflicted by an inmate.

William C. Holman Correctional Facility

Alabama Dept. of Corrections

CO Robert E. Ransom

EOW: September 30, 2016

Suffered fatal heart attack after helping an inmate.

Marvin A. Smith Criminal Justice Facility

Gregg County, TX

Quote of the Month

“Discovery consists not in seeking new lands, but in seeing with new eyes.”

~ Marcel Proust

DWCO Disclaimer

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DWCO Mission

To promote the occupational, personal and family well-being of the public safety workforce through the provision of support, resources and customized data-driven solutions.

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